

Countdown

by hourglasshero

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Summary: At twenty-five, Kaito has his doubts that anything will ever change for the better. That is, until a fated encounter leads him to restarting his life from his teenage years, with the fates of several lives resting in the palm of his hand. He has one chance to fix things. He has one chance to start over. He refuses to let it go to waste. [loosely based off the concept of "erased"]

1. A Second Chance

I'm really not even sure what this fic is. I was inspired by the anime series "Erased", and I haven't written for Vocaloid in forever, so I decided I would mix the two together. I aim to make this KaiLen, because Gewlface has been waiting for me to make a fic for that pairing and, well, I really wanted to anyway, heh. Aside from that, I'm not really sure about pairings. There's implied Negitoro, GakuLily and Gumi/Rin, plus Gumi/VY2 (Roro) but those might end up changing. I'm willing to take pairing suggestions as well! I apologize for my writing as of now, I'm not one for first chapters. It's kind of a scrambled mess lmao. Anyways, hopefully you enjoy this!

* * *

><p>"Even so, why do the two of us always stumble at our exchanged words?

Crumbling, breaking, and conversely being born...

Could you please teach me, right now, the meaning behind these reasons?"

* * *

><p>It was always on nights like these that Kaito found he couldn't

sleep.<p>

Outside, lightning sliced through the pitch black clouds that had gathered in the night sky, and the inner turmoil of his thoughts had grown into a clamor that mimicked the thunder screaming above his apartment. More often than not, Kaito didn't mind thunderstorms; in fact, as a kid, he remembered vividly being the only one to stare out the window in his bedroom or classroom and watch the torrent of the rain rather than duck away like a coward, as if the noise could hurt him.

For the first time in twenty-odd years, he turned away from his window as it blazed white and yanked his cerulean comforter over his head, ignoring the red blur of _2:03 _that lingered behind his eyelids.

Maybe it was the recent murder of Hatsune Miku that was bothering him. Maybe it was the paralyzing loneliness of his apartment when Meiko was away for work. Or maybe it was just that in a few more hours he would be twenty-five and it would go unnoticed by the world around him.

Kaito burrowed further under his blankets, hoping that if he sunk deep enough into the mattress he'd find himself in some sort of an alternate universe where he didn't think thunderstorms were so obnoxious, and where all the mistakes of his childhood life just-
poof! -disappeared.

Sometimes he'd ask for things like this- an escape from reality or some kind of release. He hadn't asked for much throughout the expanse of his life. As he squeezed his eyes shut, he believed resolutely that he at least deserved this.

He wasn't certain if he'd managed to fall asleep or not, but he supposed he had because the next time he felt that he was aware of his surroundings, it was eleven in the morning. For a moment, he wondered if he'd slept through his alarm or if he had forgotten to set it; after moments of moping, it dawned on him that he had the day off. It was Monday, after all. The studio didn't need him on Mondays.

With a grunt, Kaito rolled himself out of his bed and onto the itchy, carpeted floor of his apartment bedroom. He squinted against the bright light streaming in through his window, hand acting as a visor against his forehead. There were no traces in the glowing sunshine that it had rained the previous night, but then again, that was no different than every other winter storm in this city.

Even now, it was the simplest of things could get washed away in the tides of time.

Kaito sat up slowly, finally managing to kick off the sheets tangled around him after several failed attempts. He cracked his back with a loud pop, then his arms and his neck, and rose to his feet with mild satisfaction.

He shuffled into the kitchen- or, as Meiko liked to call it, the 'tiny living room food space', since it really wasn't anything else in terms of its size -in search of coffee and eggs. Disappointed to find that there were neither of these things, he rummaged through the

freezer of his refrigerator for a solid two minutes before he gave up in his endeavors, lips drawn into a tight, frustrated frown. There was no ice cream. There was no anything.

Of course, he blamed it on the fact that he'd been too stressed (and too broke) to go grocery shopping as of late, and the aisles always confused him when Meiko wasn't around, and she hadn't been around at all these past few months, so he had had no real time to go out and buy food, or any necessities for that matter. It wasn't really his fault. It was just the winding road of life, or whatever Ritsu always called it.

Really.

He grumbled angrily to himself through every agonizing moment it took to get dressed, his stomach growling and his head aching from a lack of caffeine.

Just as he pulled on his scarf and started out the door, a sharp series of rings sounded from the countertop. Kaito wheeled back around the second he recognized the ringtone, still grumbling even when he picked the device up and answered the call.

"Ritsu-,"

"Oi, Shion."

Kaito winced at the usage of his last name; he'd figured they'd be on first name basis at this point, but...Well, Ritsu was a strange man. "What's up?" he asked, remembering- thanks to Meiko's nagging voice at the back of his head -to lock his door before he slid out of it. The corridor of the apartment was void of life, other than himself, as it often was during the morning.

"You know that thing about the singer girl that used to go to our high school?"

"You mean Miku?" Kaito murmured slowly. It was a topic he'd been trying to avoid.

Ritsu said something incoherent and muffled at a distance. His voice became clear again just as quickly. "Yeah, her." He hesitated, clicking his tongue, and Kaito, still taking long strides toward the out of order elevator shaft, listened. "Cul thinks she knows what happened."

"Since when does Cul know anything? I doubt she even knew how to count until she was in middle school."

"Ooh, you're grumpy today. Have you not had your morning coffee?" Ritsu teased, a smile noticeable in his voice.

"Unfortunately, I haven't." Kaito passed by the elevator toward the doorway hidden discreetly by the edge of the wall. He jostled the rusty knob once, then a second time, and pushed inward. The door flung open on loose hinges and banged against the bricks of the staircase foyer.

"Want to meet me for coffee? I'm about to go on my lunch break."

"I was actually about to go grocery shopping," Kaito said as he squeezed through the threshold and scrambled down the stairs. "Though, I guess before that works."

"Great!" the other man cooed. "How does Kasane's Cafe sound?"

It was a bit out of the way, but Kaito wasn't one to refuse a coffee. "Sure, that's fine." Shouldering his way into the lobby, he remembered what his friend had told him about Cul's assumptions, and he added, "So, what's the situation with Miku?"

"Right." There was the sound of paper rustling, and a soft _click_. "Cul thinks a gang had to do with it."

Kaito thought about that for a brief moment. And he snorted. "That's ridiculous."

"Well, yeah, that's what I said at first, too," Ritsu huffed. "But Cul makes it seem a lot more sensical. She says that-...You remember Megurine Luka, right?"

"I think so," Kaito responded. He stepped awkwardly through the revolving doors of the lobby, tripping over his own two feet as he tried to recollect an image of the woman. Truth be told, most of the memories of his childhood had faded away over the years, but he vaguely remembered that she and Meiko had been friends.

And, for some odd reason, he remembered the Kagamine twins. He remembered suddenly that Rin had befriended him on his first day of school, all big eyes and bright smiles, and he remembered that Len had remained her shadow, his eyes downcast and his lips a pout. He remembered that day upon day the twins would come to class with bruises, their cheeks red and their heads lowered; but the reason as to why, he'd never known. He'd never bothered asking.

The man talking to him, on the other hand- he had no idea how they'd met or interacted during their childhood days, but somehow, when they applied for the same job, Ritsu recognized him and from then on, they were, to say the least...companions. Not that Kaito minded; the redhead was pleasant company on lethargic days like this one.

It always bewildered him, the intensity of thoughts, and the way that his memories were like flowers in bloom.

Ritsu continued about the same time Kaito started listening again, "Luka's a detective, or a cop, apparently- and she and Miku were living together. Luka had gotten involved in some gang case. Cul said she thinks the gang retaliated and killed Miku by way of a warning."

"That's surprisingly not as bad as I thought it would be," Kaito snorted.

"Don't be an ass, Shion."

The bluenette stifled a laugh. "Sorry, sorry," he mused. "But, hey, let's be real here, it's not like-,"

"Roro Okunuma. He used to be your friend, right?" Ritsu interrupted. His voice had melted away into something more irked than

enthusiastic.

Kaito quirked a brow. "Yeah, he was. Pink hair and yellow eyes, right? Really tall?"

"Uh-huh," Ritsu said. "He's part of one of these gangs. He had some kind of a disagreement with Luka in their last year of high school."

"How in hell do you even know all of this?" Kaito asked.

He could almost imagine the redhead's usual modest hair flip as he chimed, "I get around."

"I'm sure you do," Kaito muttered as he flicked his gaze from his shoes to the dense crowd of people manifesting in front of him, maneuvering in between the mass. "Still, I don't think I can really believe that. For all anybody knows, it could have been a suicide. She was getting popular with her musical career, and the fame could have been getting to her. I don't know."

"Shion," Ritsu sighed, exasperated, "how does a woman shoot herself without a gun?"

"Magic?"

Ritsu nearly choked on a laugh. "You're literally an idiot," he snickered.

"That may be so, but at least I don't look like one."

"Rude!" Ritsu retorted. "I'm more attractive than half the women in this world, anyways. You're just jealous."

"I can assure you I'm not. I've got enough charm of my own," the bluenette huffed. Gradually, his mind shifted back on track, and he tilted his head toward the approaching crosswalk. "Why have you and Cul been so interested by this entire..._thing_, anyway?"

"I liked Miku," was all Ritsu alleged.

"I did too, but it's not like-..."

And then the words were swallowed up by the astounded look on Kaito's face, by the silence of the phone call as his eyes fell on the distant figure that he desperately wanted to believe wasn't who he thought it was. But that person- they were unmistakably him, from the bright yellow hair to the slumped posture, from the shorts in the middle of winter to the pale white complexion.

Kaito grit his teeth and quickened his pace, watching the graceful shift in movement the figure took into a small bakery, and, without thinking, without even so much as a second of hesitation, he followed.

An irritated voice snapped at him from the other line of the call he'd forgotten he'd been a part of. "Shion? Shion! Oi, Kaito!"

"Ritsu," Kaito said, and he found that, somehow, his voice was still

calm, still even, "I think we better take a rain check for that coffee."

* * *

><p>A pair of aquamarine eyes stared at him from across the table. In all of ten years, they hadn't changed in the slightest. There was still a subtle ring of green around the iris, flecks of a darker blue dashed along the sides of even that. They glowed like the stars, radiant and vivid, and it comforted Kaito to know they hadn't changed. Because Len had. Len really had.<p>

"It's been a while," Kaito said, a soft smile on his face as he took a sip from his coffee. It tasted bitter, but he blamed it on the atmosphere. That's what it always came down to, anyways.

Len leaned his cheek onto his fist and nodded lazily. "Yeah, it has." He paused before adding, "You really don't look any different than you did in eighth grade."

"My high school attractiveness will never fade."

"Yikes, I think it already has. You look like a truck just hit you, backed up, and hit you again."

But Kaito knew that lopsided smirk, the crease under Len's luminous eyes. He knew he was teasing in that childish way of his, and it filled him with a sense of alleviation to know that at least one member of his youthful memories could still smile. He knew damn well that Miku wouldn't anymore, and he really couldn't say for Luka. He hoped she'd find it in her to smile again. He really did.

At least Len could. That felt like it was enough for Kaito.

"You don't look too shabby, you know," Kaito said, but the words felt limp in his mouth. They felt like a lie. They were a lie.

Len had changed.

There were bags underneath his eyelids, dark and staining, and no better were the hollows of his whitened cheeks. His shaggy blonde hair, which had once stopped just short of reaching his shoulders, which had once always been pulled into a sloppy ponytail, now rested a few inches past his shoulders, and it didn't quite fit him, the way it was loose and wavy and free from restraint. He was skinny, too- not lanky or scrawny like he'd been back in high school; that was just his build. No, he was skinny, as if he hadn't eaten enough, hadn't slept enough, hadn't lived enough.

It didn't even look like he was really living anymore. He was almost a corpse. Almost, but not quite. He was still breathing, after all.

Yet, Kaito found him- even after all these years -pretty, as he was sure all the people who didn't pay attention closely enough to him did. Because that's just what Len was; sickly, but pretty. Something of a cherished, wilting plant.

Len hadn't said anything in response to Kaito's comment, the bluenette realized, just as he'd also realized he'd been staring, and

Len had averted his gaze down to the steaming cup of tea in front of him.

Kaito took a sharp inhale and gripped his coffee cup tightly. "So, what brings you back here? I could have sworn Cul said you moved pretty far away." _Though_, he thought, _Cul doesn't know all that much._

After a beat of quiet, Len affirmed, "Oh, I did. I moved out after high school, to Shizuoka. I like to visit Sendai every now and again, though. Brings back memories."

"I get that," Kaito said quietly. "That's why I never moved away. I like the nostalgia of living here. Every now and again I'll just think, _Oh, hey, this is where in fourth grade Meiko punched me in the arm and for the first time, I didn't cry_. Well, maybe not exactly like that, but you get what I mean."

Len pushed his smile into the palm of his hand. "Mhm."

"Oh, hey," Kaito thought aloud, "how's Rin? I lost touch with her after I transferred."

The smile on Len's face died and rotted, and the image of a sunshine-deprived sunflower became very clear at the back of Kaito's head.

He regretted saying anything at all.

"The year you left," Len said, his voice muffled by his hand, "there was a lot of conflict between her and this gang and Gumi, and, I mean, she was trying not to get herself involved- I guess she just really wanted to protect Nakajima -but, she justâ€¦" He tapped his free hand anxiously beside his cup of tea. "She pissed them off- or, well, that's what Luka says...That's what she _thinks_...And then...they killed her. Some part of that stupid gang found Rin and they shot her. But, it's-...that's just what we-,"

"Luka? As in, Megurine Luka?" Kaito found himself blurting. It felt like the horribly wrong thing to bring up, but he couldn't help himself. He couldn't ignore the fact that Len had kept contact with her.

"Yeah." Len slid his hand off his face and draped it over the other. "When I started college I heard that she was a cop, or something. Since I couldn't for the life of me get over not knowing what happened to Rin, I found her and she helped me out. I wish she hadn't though...I really...kind of wish she hadn't."

Kaito had a feeling he knew exactly why. He pressed the rim of his cup to his lips, only just registering the taste of his beverage. "You heard about Miku, then?"

"That's actually one of the reasons I came here. I wanted to talk to Luka about it," Len mumbled. "That, and it's almost the anniversary of Rin's death."

Suddenly, all the words spoken to Kaito by that annoying trap friend of his didn't seem like bullshit. He found that this very well could be a reality. There could be some kind of a gang out there that was

seeking vengeance on people without a sliver of mercy. And Kaito could see a very fine connection between those involved.

"Do you have a place to stay?" Kaito asked quickly, setting his cup back down on the table.

"...What?"

"I said, do you have a place to stay? If not, I'd like if you stayed with me for the next few days. Until you have to go back home."

Scratching weakly at the back of his reddening neck, Len murmured, "I was going to see if I could stay with Luka, butâ€¦"

"I think it's best if you don't."

Len peered out the window to his left. "How far away do you live?"

"Just a few blocks. Not even,"

"Is it okay?" Len asked. "I don't want to invade your personal space or anything."

Kaito waved a hand dismissively. "Nah, I don't mind. It's kind of lonely without Meiko around anyway. I could use the company."

"...Okay," Len acceded, and Kaito could only wonder if he imagined the intense flush of his cheeks. The blonde cleared his throat, running the tip of her index finger across the lid of his cup. "So, you and Meiko are still in touch? That's good."

"If by 'in touch' you mean she comes into my house when I'm not home and scavenges through all my food and I put up with it, then, yeah, we're still in touch," Kaito mused. He finished off his coffee with another long swig, and tilted his head at Len as he swallowed. "What about you? Do you still talk to anyone from high school?"

"Not really. Oliver and I tried to stay friends, but about three months ago, we just kind of...stopped, y'know? We haven't talked for awhile. But- you remember Tei?" Len asked, worrying on his lower lip.

Kaito nodded. She'd been Len's secret admirer for years when they were younger. He was sure they'd even dated, but again, memories like that had never held much significance to him. He'd erased them years ago.

"She and I were engaged up until recently."

If Kaito hadn't finished his coffee, he was sure he would have spit it right onto the table in between them. "R-really?"

"Yeah. For about a year and half."

"You broke it off?"

Len sheepishly tucked his face back into the cusp of his hand.

"Yeah," he repeated.

With a gentle sigh, Kaito rose from his seat and jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. This constant talking was doing something to him. He felt nauseous, sort of like the world beneath him was spinning and the world above him was sinking. "C'mon, let's go. You look like you could use a shower and some good ol' terrible television."

"I think you're right."

As Len pushed himself into a standing position, he blinked rapidly, and pressed the back of his hand to his forehead. "Hey, Kaito?"

"Mm?"

"It's February seventeenth, right?"

Kaito hesitated at the doorway of the bakery, his shoulders rigid. "It is," he said, his voice low and uncertain.

"Huh. Happy Birthday, then." Without another word, Len stepped out of the doors of the bakery, hands jammed in the pockets of his hoodie and his head bowed toward the ground.

There was a passing moment where Kaito wasn't sure if he had the ability to move. Eventually, with the faintest hint of a smile on his face, he shuffled out of the shop, thinking over and over again how things like this usually came out of shoujo mangas and lame reality TV shows.

Strangely, though, he didn't seem to mind.

* * *

><p>It wasn't until an hour after he stepped inside his apartment that he remembered he hadn't done what he'd gone out to do in the first place.<p>

But that was just a reoccurring pattern in the life of Shion Kaito.

"Damnit," he muttered as he opened the cabinets for the umpteenth time. They were empty, just as they had been when he'd left, and just as he'd hoped they wouldn't be when he returned.

It can't be helped, he thought, quickly shutting the small wooden doors, _that I got sidetracked for a good cause._

The good cause poked his head up over the back of the sofa, his messy hair damp and his eyes bleary with fatigue. A book he'd borrowed from Kaito's room was draped over his lap, the pages already creased, the corners dog-eared. "Do you need help with something? You've been flailing around the kitchen since I got out of the shower."

"It's fine," Kaito said. "You need anything? I've got, uh...booze, probably."

"For someone I barely know, you're really pampering me." Len flicked his gaze away, as if contemplating, and returned it with a grin. "I'm

not complaining, though; it's nice." He leaned back down on the cushions of the sofa, scooping the novel back up and flipping back to wherever he'd left off.

Kaito stared dumbly at him as he leaned against the countertop, his head cocked to the side and his mouth agape. "So, is that a 'no' to drinks, or...?"

"Actually, if you have any sake, that'd be great."

"I'm pretty sure that's all I have," Kaito muttered. Meiko had a habit of coming over time and time again carrying bottles of sake that could last a person a lifetime. She'd always pass out, drunk and hysteric, halfway through her first go, leaving leftover rice wine in her wake that Kaito never needed nor wanted. He kept it anyways, and even though Meiko would have his head for giving it to someone that wasn't her, he felt glad that he had.

He grabbed a wine glass from the cupboards and a bottle of sake from underneath the sink, pouring a quaint amount into the cup.

Len's head popped up again, his eyes narrowed at a piece of paper in his hand. "You write music?"

Kaito quirked a brow, grabbing the glass from off the table and making his way toward the lounge. He handed it off to Len, his other hand plucking the scrap from the blonde's grasp. Instant recognition flooded his senses. "I work at a studio," he explained, "as a lyric writer. This was part of a project I worked on, like...months ago."

"You must not have liked it for it to turn into a bookmark," Len snorted.

"Er, no, I guess not."

Lifting his shoulders, Len flicked his fingers toward a desk crammed into the corner of the room. "Can I read some of your stuff?"

"Knock yourself out. It's all just a ton of half-hearted garbage."

A grin marred Len's features. "I highly doubt that," he laughed, and meandered off toward the unkempt heap of papers and pencils and wrappers, wine glass dancing in his slender hand.

"Well, while you entertain yourself with my failure as a writer," Kaito muttered, "I'm going to go take a shower."

"I might've used all the hot water."

"I'll live."

As he slipped into the bathroom, Kaito felt something of a bad omen pricking at the back of his neck. But he did what he always did in these kinds of situations. He closed the door, and he ignored it.

* * *

><p>There was a sticky note taped onto the refrigerator. Kaito tugged it off with one hand as the other towed off his hair. He scanned

the words hurriedly, his brows furrowing in confusion.<p>

In barely legible penmanship, it read, _Kaito, there's nothing to eat here, so I figured I'd go out and buy stuff so I (we) don't starve. The lyrics were really good, by the way. You should have more confidence in your talent. -Len_

Kaito pursed his lips to suppress a smile, pocketing the note and ambling over to his desk in the living room.

He rummaged through his stacks of notes and thoughts and ideas, silently critiquing them, and wondering what potential Len could have possibly seen in any of them. Half of the things he'd written didn't even make sense to _him_, and he'd been the one to _write_ them. Still, it was relieving to know at least someone could look past his heart-ripping block and lack of pretty words to find something meaningful in his inanity.

After a moment of debating, he collapsed into his seat and procured a pen from underneath a tattered five subject notebook. He flipped to an available page, chewing his lower lip as he let the tip of the instrument glissade over the wrinkled parchment.

About an hour in, just as he was starting to think, _Hey, where's Len?_, there was a knock at his door.

For a dazzling moment, he thought that maybe it was Meiko; but she never knocked, and furthermore, she was in Europe. And she was likely going to be staying there for a few months more. He replaced the concept with Len, and found himself eager regardless of whom it was.

"Coming!" he shouted toward the general direction of the door. He pushed himself out of his chair and roved over to the threshold, yanking back the knob and coming face-to-face with an angry-looking man.

Kaito awkwardly hooked his thumbs into his belt loops. "Can...I help you?"

"Are you Shion Kaito?"

"Uh-huh."

"Does the name 'Kagamine Len' sound familiar to you?"

"...Uh-huh," Kaito repeated, slower this time. The words tasted bitter, like his coffee this morning, like the atmosphere that manifested when approaching a practical stranger, like a first kiss with a person who you held no interest for. Sickeningly bittersweet.

The man's expression softened. He cleared his throat and said four words that sent a splintering shiver down Kaito's spine and made him think, _Oh, I shouldn't have ignored it_.

"There's been an incident."

* * *

><p>He wasn't sure when it started.<p>

It was maybe at some point between the officer telling him that Kagamine Len had been murdered on the streets in front of a crowd of people and that Okunuma Roro had been claimed the culprit of not only his death, but his sister's, and Hatsune Miku's, and Nakajima Megumi's.

It was at some point then that the world started to melt away from Kaito's line of vision.

It was then that he started to realize something wasn't right.

He clenched his fists in the fabric of his sweatpants and tried to focus on the man speaking in front of him to no avail. Red and blue were pricking at the edge of an evincing ideality, plunging him into the depths of his memories, of all the things that had been locked away somewhere inside his head.

After that, he wasn't sure what happened. He closed the door, he knew, despite the officer's protest for him to come down to the station and discuss this.

What kind of a birthday is this? he thought, and it blazed into, _What kind of a_ life_ is this?_

Then, there was a vibrant flash of achromatic light, the kind he would have seen in the thunderstorm that had kicked off this day not twelve hours ago, and yet, he was sure that he was the only one that saw it as it seared behind his eyelids and left nothing but a wake of absolute black. For a moment, Kaito had no doubt that he'd died, that by some coincidence, his heart decided to give out on the same day it had started to beat.

There was sudden warmth against his wrist, and an irritable, familiar voice barking at him as he was tugged forward through the endless expanse of darkness.

Hey, his inner conscious thought, _maybe you should open your eyes._

He did.

It was snowing. He was standing outside. And he felt short. _Shorter_, perhaps. He breathed in a cold gulp of air and shifted his eyes from the cement beneath his feet to the girl in front of him. The girl that...looked just like Meiko, butâ€|

"Bakaito, are you even _listening? C'mon, _move it_ or we're gonna _be late!_"

That harsh, violent voice was nothing like Meiko's, and yet, it was. It was as if they were kids again, the way her chest was flat; the way her auburn hair wasn't chopped into a messy pixie cut but instead fell to her chin in a neat, sleek bob; the way that her eyes weren't glassy with intoxication. They held youth and excitement, and it made Kaito want to vomit.

He knew that this was real. This was indeed a reality, but his mind was trying with all its might to pretend that that was not fact. This

was a nightmare. This was a depression, grief-induced hallucination. This was fake.

"You gonna figure out how to move your legs or d'you need me to freakin' carry you? Geez, pick up the pace, asshat!"

It took him a couple seconds, but he figured out how to use his voice, and he nearly screamed at the childish intonation of his words. He was a kid. He was really, actually a kid again.

This was- this wasâ€¦

"I'mâ€¦" Kaito swallowed the lump in his throat and took a shaky step after his companion. "I'm sorry!"

He closed his eyes.

This was a second chance.

* * *

><p>There we go, there's the first chapter! In case the end came off as confusing, Kaito did indeed go back in time (back to eighth grade to be specific), and from here on out, the story will take place in that time era. It will likely dabble a little into ninth grade too. Henceforth, chapters will probably have memories from not only Kaito's perspective, but also other characters'- regardless, Kaito will still see the memory as though it were his own. Phew, and with that done and out of the way, I think I'm gonna go!~ :0 Review if it's your thing, and if it's not, see you around!

**With love,
>Hour.

2. Reformation

I was eager to update, so within just a couple of days, here's the second chapter! I'll admit I rushed it a bit, so forgive me if anything seems disoriented or messy. I was trying to put a lot of introductory things into this update to help set up for coming events, which can be kind of complicated. So, without further ado, please, go ahead and read this chapter!

* * *

><p>"The letters on our screens don't show a face.

Instead, we hurt each other easily.

Is it okay to live if we depend on something

And hide a knife inside our chest?"

* * *

><p>There was a certain sense of wistfulness that came with walking down the hallways of his old junior high school again, the kind that made Kaito remember the yearning he'd felt as an adult for this sort

of youthful innocence and simplicity.<p>

But those around him, Kaito was sure, had no idea what lay ahead of them on their paths to adulthood. Not Hatsune Miku, who was passing out flyers for her band auditions; not Megurine Luka, who was standing at window and redoing her lipstick; not Nakajima Megumi, who was chasing Yuezheng Ling full speed down the corridor; not Okunuma Roro, who was awkwardly flirting with Yuzuki Yukari like he did every morning; not Kagamine Rin, who was standing with her hands clasped behind her back as she waited for Kaito outside their classroom; and most certainly not Kagamine Len, who was wiping the blood dripping from his nose away with the hem of his shirt and muttering expletives under his breath.

They were all oblivious to the repeat of an existence, every last one of them. Except for Kaito. Except for him, truly a nobody, with his eyes glued to the back of Meiko's head and his feet tripping over one another, because that's what he always did, and this was the always of the past. At least, for now it was. This was the originality of the world, and Kaito had a horrific feeling that he was going to be the one to rip that away and change everything.

He wouldn't have imagined that, out of all the people in the world, he would be the one to have the balance of several lives handed to him.

"Hey, Kaito! Kai-kun! Hey!"

Kaito jolted, tearing his arm out of Meiko's death grip to face a pair of brightly shining teal eyes that belonged to none other than Hatsune Miku. She beamed at him and waved a piece of stationery in front of his face. "I'm hosting an audition tomorrow! Do you think you can make it?"

"Uh, well-,"

"You play guitar, right?" Miku cooed. She flapped the flyer again.

Kaito hesitantly took it from her, his eyes trailing toward Len as he hobbled into the classroom, Rin offering him a hand that he was quick to brush off. She looked hurt, but it lasted for only a split second. Her attention was quickly averted back to Kaito, and the bluenette took note of it. "We'll see," he told Miku gently.

Meiko slammed a fist into his shoulder. "No, we won't! Your birthday is tomorrow, remember? And you said your having a party, you big idiot!"

"Your birthday is tomorrow, Kai-kun?" The tealette rocked back on her heels and pressed a perfectly manicured pinky to her lips. "Well, stop by the band room before classes tomorrow, then! Okay? See you around!" Then she was off, taking a good three paces before she slammed into a fuming Yukari's chest in the midst of offering Roro a flyer. "Oh, Yuka-chan, would you-...No? Okay, well, that's fine, no need to yell!"

As she sprinted off down the corridor again, Meiko snorted and shot Kaito an annoyed glare. "Would you actually want to be in a band with that? Your head'll probably explode," she snorted.

"I'm good with lyrics," Kaito replied quickly as he folded the paper and pocketed it. "I could help out. It might be nice."

"Bakaito," was all Meiko muttered in response. She veered around and staggered into the classroom, bumping into Rin with no audible apology provided.

The blonde cleared her throat and swiftly sidestepped away from the threshold. She smiled that dainty smile of hers', giving Kaito a waggle of fingers in greeting and a cheery, "Good morning!"

Kaito tousled her hair as he passed, relishing in the fact that this person was actually here and she was alive, and so was he and so was everyone else. "Morning, pipsqueak," he returned, and wondered if the quirk of his lips was unsettling to her, especially in regards to his obvious acknowledgment of the poorly concealed bruise ostending upon her neck.

Rin conveyed no signs of being fazed, although she did make to tug the collar of her sweater higher up her nape.

"Are you planning on joining Miku's band?" Rin queried. She sauntered after Kaito toward the back of the room, where he was certain his desk had been- or, rather, where it was, right beside Roro and right behind a particular blonde boy resting his chin in the palm of his hand and doodling dark swirls in his notebook.

"I dunno," Kaito murmured, "but I'm thinking about it."

Truth be told, he wasn't. He'd already come to a decision.

Whereas once he'd turned down the opportunity to join what would later become one of the most popular high school bands in all of Japan, Kaito would this time step forth to pursue a dream he knew he had a chance at fulfilling. Maybe it would prevent him from becoming such a deadbeat as an adult.

"You should do it. I think it suits you!" Rin mused.

From across the room, Meiko shrieked, "Don't encourage him!"

Before Rin could dish out a retort, the doors to the room slid open and a lanky, familiar figure stepped through the opening. It had been years since Yokune Ruko even so much as itched at the back of Kaito's memory. But for all it was worth, he had been perhaps the greatest assistant teacher Kaito had ever known. The man was rambunctious, to say the least, and loud, and he had an odd habit of slinking into the supplies closet; and these aspects, Kaito had admired. They were what made the man so talented in unique. That, and his figure. There had been confusion about it for years.

Scrambling in behind him were Miku, Megumi, Ling and Fukase, and after a few more belated moments, Luka. They filed into their seats, delving into hushed conversations through the clatter of their folders and bags hitting the ground.

Kaito slipped silently into his chair, his eyes following Rin as she hurriedly trotted to the front of the room to her seat beside Aria. Slowly, his gaze slid to Len, and it stayed there, watching with

intrigue as the blonde scribbled on his hands when his paper grew too maimed to write on.

Kaito did little else for a majority of the class. Even after Hiyama Kiyoteru strolled into the room and launched into taking attendance and, with not a moment to spare, a lecture about physics, the bluenette could not for the life of him look away from Len's small, fragile frame. It looked as if at any moment, he would shatter, as if whatever it was that held him together would give out, and he would collapse, a mess, upon the floor. But the more Kaito looked, the more he realized Len would not be breaking apart any time soon.

For someone's sake, no doubt his sister's, he was sewing every wound the moment the threads went slack.

Toward the end of class, when Kaito had felt his staring had reached the point of being excessive, he shifted his eyes back to his hands and his thoughts toward the young man seated beside him.

To think that those hands, tapping a pencil against the corner of a desk, were capable of murder.

In the future, Roro would be responsible for the deaths of multiple students in this very classroom. Yet as of now, he was not only the plausible reason behind Kaito's return to this time era, but also his friend, and that alone was unnerving. But maybe that could be used to change something. His relationship with any of his fellow students could change things.

Kaito quickly lifted his eyes to scan his the classroom, and found that there was not even the slightest detail out of order. Everything was as it should have been. Miku and Luka were bickering about some new musical group, Rin, Aria and Suzune were steadily progressing in their work, Fukase and Gumi were spewing spitballs at Ling, Oliver and Lui from across the room. They were firing back with paper airplanes. Occasionally, Len would join in- those were his friends, after all -and Kaito would watch while half-heartedly listening to Roro ramble on beside him, the words hazy and filtered.

Ritsu was complaining to Piko, and the whitette made to nod at all the right times, fueling the obnoxious whines of the boy beside him. Mayu, Miki and Iroha were talking in angry murmurs, their lips twisted into nasty smirks as they spewed nothing but venom. Meiko turned her head over her shoulder to snap at them every five or so minutes. Tei had been staring at Len even longer than Kaito had, which oddly made the bluenette's blood boil inside his veins.

Everything was as it should have been.

And that made it wrong.

"Shion!"

Kaito jerked his head up, making direct eye contact with Ruko as the man leaned back against the edge of Kiyoteru's desk. "Are you dozing off again?"

"No," Kaito lied.

"Uh-huh. Then what did I just say?"

Kaito really didn't know why he was so surprised; this never ceased to happen no matter where he went. He was constantly distracted by his own imagination. He tilted his head, thought about it for a moment, and slowly said, "We're going to start reading American literature soon...?"

"Oh? So you were listening, good for you," Ruko said, and waved a hand wildly at the board behind him. "As of this week, we'll be reviewing English vocabulary and grammar, and by the end of it, we'll move on to read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It's a personal favorite of mine, actually! I have a feeling the majority of you fine readers will like it a lot!"

From his desk, Kiyoteru added, "We'll be splitting all of you into groups of three for an assignment starting Thursday."

There was the drone of objecting whines for several moments, but amid it, Kaito found himself both quiet and hopeful at the prospect. This was the assignment of which had led him to befriending Tianyi and growing indifferent toward Gumi, which held little significance, if any at all; so, if perhaps he were to talk to his teachers about switching up the groups, he could land himself partnered with Len. It had steadily become Kaito's mission to befriend him, he had decided, and to prevent Len from the years of suffering both he and his sister had coming.

Though...the Kagamines weren't the only glitch he had to fix. What of Roro, and Gumi, and Miku? What could he possibly do for any of them?

What of himself?

He shook his head. There was no use dawdling on these things when his mind was too muddled of a mess to comprehend them. Chewing absently on his nails, Kaito merely leaned back in his seat and waited patiently for the next few classes to roll to an end. His aching subconscious was screaming at him for a break.

And then it started screaming louder, and louder, until a buzzing din sprouted inside of Kaito's head that overwhelmed his senses. He felt numbness spreading from the tips of his fingers down to his wrists, engulfing his arms at an excruciatingly slow pace.

A flicker of color danced behind his eyelids, and there it was; a memory, one that surely did not belong to him. But it was there nonetheless, clinging onto him, begging to be watched, and heard, and repeated. And, Kaito, after a moment of struggling, succumbed to the plea and let the color erupt against his world.

* * *

><p>The room was disturbingly silent. For the first time in weeks, there was only his own steady breathing to keep him company during the nighttime, and nothing else. No disgusting words being spoken in his ear, no hands twisting into his flesh, no melodical and fake laughter wafting up the stairs, no music being played by the neighbors. It was silent, and it was lonely.

Spending the nights lonely was never the same as spending them alone.

He sat up agonizingly sluggish, his back and arms threatening to rive with every movement involved in discarding his blankets and sliding onto his feet. Taking small, unbalanced steps, he made his way out of the bedroom and to the one directly across the corridor, pushing open the door with strenuous effort. It felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds more than him.

"_I had a nightmare," he said the moment the door closed behind him. He hobbled toward the bed stuffed into the corner of the room on stiff legs, waiting for the usual response of his sister on nights like these. It took a few hesitant moments, but eventually, Rin scooted over, leaving enough space for Len to crawl into the blankets beside her._

She kept her back to him as she mumbled, "Again?"

He clenched his fists in the comforter and chose to say nothing.

When Rin spoke this time, he could hear the shift it took for her to face him, but he didn't dare open his eyes to see hers' staring back at him in the darkness of the room. "How many?" she whispered.

"_What?" But Len knew. He knew exactly what she was asking._

"_How many was it tonight?"_

"_I lost count," Len admitted, "but...maybe twenty."_

Rin let out a sharp exhale between pursed lips. "That's too many. It's too many, Len..."

He didn't say anything again.

His sister did.

"_How many of those do you think were for me?"_

"_It doesn't matter, because it _wasn't _you. And it'll stay that way." Len blinked open an eye and saw nothing but desperation in Rin's countenance. He grit his teeth and brought a hand reassuringly up to her bangs. "I'll make sure of that."_

"_You can't just-,"_

"_I can, and I will. As long as Mom's happy and you're safe, then my well-being doesn't matter."_

Rin shook his hand off, her brows drawn together in question. "You think Mom's happy?"

"_Of course. She's got a boyfriend who loves her, a good, paying job, a nice house, and, as far as she's concerned, two happy, healthy kids. There's no reason for her not to be happy, and there's no reason for us to impede on her happiness."_

"_...Do you think Dad would be happy?"_

Taken aback, Len tilted his vision toward his bare feet, poking out from underneath the bedsheets. He shook his head weakly. "No...But-Dad isn't here anymore."

"_So what? He would've wanted better for Mom than scum like him_"_

"_He's not...a bad guy, really," Len whispered._

"_If Mom knew he-,"_

Len cast her a sharp look, but it dissipated nearly the moment it materialized. "She won't. She won't know, Rin, and we won't let her know. What if he did something to her, or to you, huh? This is for the best."

"_It's not," Rin protested. "He could kill you, and then what? What would Mom do if she had to find out like this?"_

"_There's nothing we can do. If word slips, then...then he'd hurt you. And Mom. Right? What would happen then, if I was left by myself? Or...or if you or even Mom was justâ€¦!" He tensed at the sight of tears in Rin's eyes, and shifted to stare at the ceiling, tracing the delicate swirling patterns that arced across it. "It's better me than you."_

"_It's not," Rin repeated._

And Len said nothing.

The silence consumed the world again, but, at least this time it wasn't tainted by loneliness. At least this time there was the sound of gentle crying beside him.

* * *

><p>"Bakaito, are you gonna eat that?"<p>

Kaito glanced up from the book in his hands and, essentially, the untouched tray of rice and curry set out on his desk. Meiko stood before him, ogling the plate with her arms crossed beneath her bosom.

"I don't think so," Kaito conceded, nudging his meal forward. His appetite had yet to return to him since the vision he'd experienced a few classes previous. "You can have it, if you want."

A smirk blossomed against the girl's face as she hurriedly snatched the tray off her friend's desk and made for the one beside him. Roro had gone to spend the lunch break with Piko and Ritsu out on the roof, Kaito presumed, which left space for Meiko to slide up next to him in eager anticipation. "What're you reading?" she blurted through a mouthful.

Kaito curiously flipped to the front cover and felt a tug at the corner of his lips. To this day, the novel he clutched in his hands was undoubtedly his favorite of all time. Years after reading it, it stuck with him. "You know the Pandora Vox series that came out a

little while back?"

"The one by Kemu?"

Kaito grinned. "That'd be the one! I'm on Invisible. It's really, really good."

"Lemme see." Meiko wiped a hand on her blazer and reached out to snatch the book from Kaito's grip. She flipped through a few pages, scowling as she did so, her interest obviously having transfixed itself elsewhere. "It looks like crap," she huffed, and tossed it back at him as though it were a discarded candy wrapper.

"You wouldn't know good literature if it hit you in the face."

"What can I say? Movies are better. You get all the action, and you don't gotta put any effort into enjoying it. It's nice and easy, just the way I like it."

"You're just lazy," Kaito noted.

"I'm not!" Meiko punched his thigh, her chestnut eyes glinting in mischief. "Now, go put my tray away."

Rolling his eyes, Kaito tucked his novel safely under his chair and hefted himself onto his feet, grabbing the tray of half-eaten remnants with a faint smile on his face. Yet, as he stepped over to the back of the room where the stack of dirty dishes in waiting to be cleaned rested, he found that the thought of the earlier memory jarred him back into an anxious state of mind and wiped the expression clean off his face.

Those he'd seen had been Len and Rin- of that, he was certain -but the conversation they'd been having was nothing but a vague recollection at the back of his mind. Although, perhaps that was a good thing. It made him feel disgusting, how he had invaded on a personal mnemonic of someone else.

What made him feel worse was that he had felt Len's pain all throughout his back and arms, as if he'd been lashed at and cut with a whip. His stomach clenched in displeasure at the thought of anyone having to undergo such an immense laceration, especially...especially Len. He wondered briefly if the same could be said about Rin; if she, too, had been victim to that crippling pain.

As Kaito set his tray down on the rack, he couldn't help but think he'd achieved some kind of inhumane ability to slip himself inside the eyes of another and witness their past through his own. If so, then he felt sickened.

That alone should have been a feat prohibited from use.

He ducked back around, his head lowered, his fists clenched, and was met with a sudden warmth against his chest just as he went to make for his desk.

Kaito poked his gaze down to find Len awkwardly backing away from him, a deep crimson hue cast upon his face. When he said nothing, the bluenette gave an embarrassed smile and chimed, "Sorry, my bad! I wasn't watching where I was going."

"It's fine," Len said, sidestepping around the other's broad figure to deposit his tray on the rack.

This hadn't happened before. Whatever had happened, it wasn't this. It had never been this. But that was what Kaito wanted- what he needed. This was an opportunity.

"Hey!" he exclaimed a fraction of a second prior to Len's attempt of striding back out the door.

The blonde came to a sharp halt and gave Kaito what little attention he had to offer.

"I'm...Well, tomorrow, it's my birthday, and- it's stupid, but...I'm having some people over, for a party, and your sister is coming, so, I figured...Do you want to come too?"

Kaito didn't know what he'd been expecting as a reaction; maybe for Len to laugh and walk away, or for him to be uncomfortable, or for nothing at all. Whatever it was, it had never once crossed his mind that Len would proffer a lopsided smirk and say, "You're kind of weird, you know that, right?"

To say that it dumbfounded him was far beyond an understatement. Kaito anxiously slid a hand against his searing neck and took a half-step backwards. "I am?"

"You've never been interested in me, I mean. But you...You've been staring at me all day."

"I...No, I haven't!"

Len disregarded this completely. "And now you're trying to be friendly with me. We've barely spoken before today and suddenly you want me to come over your house because my sister is going? That's weird," he said, lifting his shoulders lazily.

"Wait, no- I...I didn't mean just because...Rin is going, I, uh..." Kaito dropped his hand back down to his side, finding himself, strangely, at a loss for words. He clicked his tongue, once, twice, and felt his confidence deflate. "I just thought it'd be nice to get to know you."

"That's so weird," Len snorted, running the backside of his hand across his face. "We're not in second grade anymore."

Kaito, for a fleeting moment, found himself looking at Meiko from across the room, but she was off in her own world, throwing wads of paper at the back of Iroha's head with that demonic sort of grin plastered to her lips. He glanced back at Len, defeated. "So, that's a no, then?"

"I didn't say that," Len mused, and his voice was much quieter this time, the smirk on his lips much less visible. His fingers itched idly at his porcelain pale cheek, his optics twitching hesitantly toward the ceiling. It seemed to be a habit of his to look up in untimely situations. "It's nice. To be considered. By you. I mean, by anyone, but, you know..." The blonde shook his head, waving a hand dismissively. "Thanks."

Kaito blinked at him for a moment, flummoxed and disoriented. _This conversation is familiar_. "So...yesâ€|?"

"Yeah, sure."

Something has changed.

"Okay, great! If you want, you can just walk home with Rin, Meiko, Roro and me!"

Len teetered back a bit, inching towards his seat as the bell signaling the end of lunch sounded. "Alright." He sauntered away the moment the words fled his lips, his hands stuffed in his pockets and his lips no doubt pinched into a lazy smile.

If Kaito could keep this up, he was sure that he could renew everything, he could save everyone. There was the lingering qualm of paradoxes that he had seen in movies and read in books, the damage that could be done by aspiring an altercation to time. The consequences he could suffer.

Let nothing be a hindrance, he reminded himself as he shuffled through the crowd to his desk, _and you will succeed_.

He would succeed.

By succeeding, he would give himself a purpose. He would give countless students life. He would tear through a soul-ripping destiny.

So, no matter what it took, no matter what sacrifices he had to make, he would succeed.

That was a promise.

* * *

><p>The city was beautiful when it snowed. Kaito had thought this for all his life; the frost creeping across the leaves of the trees and the footprints left behind in the powder were enticing and gorgeous, like something out of a storybook or a fantasy. His opinion of it hadn't changed over the many years gone by.<p>

He tugged his scarf over his nose as he waited patiently in the courtyard for Meiko, watching from the corner of his vision as Rin and Len disappeared into the storm, their silhouettes becoming nothing more than flecks of nothingness left behind in the wake of the falling snow. Kaito was tempted to watch until they were completely out of sight, but Meiko's loud, gnawing voice bit into his ears and pulled his eyes toward her.

"It's really snowing, huh?! Aren't you cold?"

Kaito slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans and shook his head. "Not really."

"You're insane," she snickered, carelessly walking past him. The endless belief that everyone would follow her if she proceeded first had been a poison to her. Kaito had always been the one to feed

it.

He dashed ahead to catch up to her, and, like they always did, they meandered down the sidewalk, away from the school and toward their neighborhoods. Meiko blathered about her day for a majority of the walk. Kaito listened, because he had little to say. When it came to Meiko, he was never much of a talker. She took care of that part of their friendship. He just offered her kindness, TV recommendations and homework answers, and in return, she kept him company. It had always been that way. Well, almost.

It had _almost _always been that way.

"So I heard you're gonna invite Len to your party," Meiko said eventually. "What's up with that? I didn't even think you liked him."

I do. I think I always did, but I never knew how to approach him, or if I could. But now I know. I know that holding back can change a lot. "I'm friends with Rin. I figured it would be nice to be friends with him, too, that's all."

"You don't think he's freaky?"

"No. Why would I?"

Meiko quirked a brow and leaned over to tug on a chunk of Kaito's hair. "You're really ignorant, Bakaito," she mumbled.

"I'm being serious. Do you think he's weird?"

"He's quiet. He doesn't talk much, and when he does, it's usually to insult someone. He draws on himself, he hangs out with all the troublemakers, he's really violent- hey, remember last year? When he punched Ritsu in the face? That's what I'm talking about. He's freaky. He's _different_."

"You punched Roro in the face, you know. Last week."

"Yeah, but that's not the same!" Meiko hissed. "I'm loud and naturally angry! He's just..._creepy_ when he gets mad! He's creepy in general!"

"So, you don't like him?"

"Well, that's..." She rested a finger against her lips. "I just don't get him."

Kaito gave a sidelong glance. "This could be a chance for that to change. Maybe you can bond over your anger. Who knows?" he mused, elbowing her in the arm.

"Whatever," Meiko groaned, adjusting the strap of her bag.

They reached a fork in the road about five quiet minutes later; this was the place they parted ways every day when they walked home together. Meiko turned on her heel, spinning toward the crosswalk on the other side of the street. "See you tomorrow, Bakaito! I'll be sure to get you the best present!"

"You can try! Rin's bested you two years in a row!"

"Shuddup, I'll surpass her this year, I swear!" Meiko smirked and waved a hand wildly over her head. "Tell Avanna I said 'hi'!"

Oh?

The moment he heard his mother's name slip from Meiko's lips, Kaito staggered, nearly slipping on a patch of ice as the weight of the word settled on him. _Mom_. How had he forgotten? How the hell had he forgotten that his own mother needed to be saved?

Maybe he'd been too caught up in Len's death to think about it. Going back in time was quite a rush, after all. His head wasn't on right. There was no fault to drawing a blank about this sort of thing.

All he could look forward to now was seeing her again, seeing her smile and her bright blue eyes dance as she recounted stories of her childhood and meeting Kaito's father and building a life with him. And losing him. And continuing onward because she was strong, because she had a heart of gold.

God, how could Kaito have forgotten?

He didn't even bother making his entrance into his house subtle. He just threw open the door and careened through the threshold, kicking off his shoes, flinging his bag off his shoulder all at once. "Mom, hey! I'm home!"

He clicked the door shut behind him, panting, exasperated from his wild dash across the snow-slick roads. Kaito peeked into the kitchen, and finding it empty, stepped out into the living room. Sure enough, Avanna was sprawled out on the sofa, a hand over her eyes and her feet propped up on an armrest. She lazily spread apart her fingers to peer at Kaito, a lazy smile gracing her lips. "I can see that," she hummed. "How was your day?"

"Good!"

"What'd you do?"

"We're starting a new assignment in literature and I aced a math test and I might join a band," Kaito said, the words slurring together at the speed of which he was speaking them. He was just finding it hard to believe this wasn't all a dream. Everyone was alive and well, and it made his throat close up as if trying to suffocate him.

Avanna shifted slowly into a sitting position and leaned her chin onto her fist. "Any idea what we're going to do for your party tomorrow?" she queried.

"I'm just going to have a few friends over, I think. Meiko and Roro and Rin and Len, probably."

"Len?" Avanna echoed. "As in, Rin's brother?"

"Uh-huh."

"I didn't know you two were friends."

Kaito twisted a foot into the carpet. "We're not. But I'm trying," he mumbled.

"That's sweet of you. So, what do you want for dinner?"

"Whatever you want, Mom."

"That's the third time this week you've said that," Avanna laughed, hoisting herself to her feet. She dusted off her dress and took a step toward Kaito, ruffling his hair affectionately. "What about tomorrow? And what kind of cake do you want?"

"Sandwiches and ice cream cake."

She cracked a grin and pulled him into a smothering embrace. "Ah, you're such a little kid sometimes! It's going to break my heart when you start driving in a few more years, and then you'll be moving out- my motherly soul can't take it!" she cried.

Kaito slowly wrapped his arms around her, desperate to confirm that this wasn't some sick apparition. This was real. _All of this was real_.

"I'm going to go out grocery shopping in a bit. Do you want to come?" Avanna said as she parted from him.

"Sure," Kaito hummed, pulling off his scarf and draping it on the back of the couch.

"Alright, let me just go get dressed- oh! And boy, do I have a story to tell you. That coworker of mine we hate? Lola? Sheesh, she's just...She's...I'll tell you all about it in the car!"

Then she was gone, and Kaito stood alone in the lounge, listening to the sound of his heartbeat as it slammed against his ribs. He tried to ignore the fact that he was crying. He really did.

But sometimes the weight of the world got the better of him.

* * *

><p>Headcanon that Avanna is Kaito's mom. It seemed very cute and I wanted to include Avanna since I love her, so! There she is. Also Kaito is very childish, and it's literally my favorite thing. He's great. Oh, and super big thanks to UntitledReader who has really given me inspiration for this fic and has talked nonstop with me about Vocaloid these past few days! The Len and Rin memory scene was 100% for her since I have a feeling she'll enjoy it. :')) Hopefully you enjoyed this chapter, once again I apologize if it seems odd in any way! Review if it's your thing, see you later if not!

**With love,
>Hour.

3. Nonsense Speaker

**Update! I'm trying to get these first couple of chapters up

quickly, and it's working so far. I mean, this chapter didn't turn out exactly the way I wanted it to, but it was fluff, and I needed fluff since the following chapters are likely going to be angsty. Rip. So, go ahead and read!**

* * *

><p>"I try to ignore the hurt inside

And bit, by bit

Part of me dies.

The smile on my face is just a lie

A lie, a lie

I just can't hide."

* * *

><p>Once, when he was maybe six years old, Kaito witnessed a young woman being hit by a car. He'd been in downtown Sendai with his father for the day to check out a new restaurant while his mother was at work. The traffic had been miserable, the sidewalks crowded and sweltering amid the summer heat. Kaito had drifted a ways away from his father to investigate the display items in the window of an antique shop.<p>

He'd turned at a voice calling his name, and his eyes fell not upon his father, but the road. A woman had been crossing at that time, a cake box in one hand, her phone in the other. The strings of numerous balloons were tied around her thin wrists, each reading _Happy Birthday!_ in the same looping calligraphy.

Maybe it had been her fault for not paying attention. Or perhaps it had been the Hyundai's fault for slamming down on the brakes too late. Either way, the front of the vehicle had struck her at full force, and Kaito, mortified, had watched as her blood drenched the asphalt with the crackling pop of several deflated balloons.

He remembered reading in a newspaper a few days later that Izanagi Mizki had died on that warm, Sunday afternoon, with nothing left on her corpse that could say, "Happy Birthday," to her awaiting son.

The memory hadn't left Kaito all night. Not once. It kept him awake after midnight, straying into the rolling tides of the dawn. As the sun crawled over the horizon, it lingered, the smell of blood distinguishable somewhere at the back of his senses. He lay in his bed, the comforter kicked down to his knees and his fingers wrenching into the fabric of his shirt, breathing heavily. A stark realization had cut through his thoughts.

No more than a day ago, it had been his twenty-fifth birthday, and Len had died. Similarly, it had been a little boy's birthday once, and his mother had died.

Today, it was Kaito's fourteenth birthday.

He wasn't sure what to expect from it.

With a groggy whine, he shook his legs loose from his blankets and hefted himself onto his feet. The air was bitterly cold on his bare skin, yet he was slick with a sheen of sweat that he was quick to blame on the budding anxiety that always came with his overthinking.

His cobalt eyes shifted toward the clock mounted above his bed.

It was early- he didn't really need to be up for another hour or so -but he figured it was better than being late. He'd just take an extra long shower and waste his time singing to himself, pretending the bad acoustics were the reason he sounded so awful.

Kaito rubbed lazily at his eyes, shuffling his way toward the bathroom at the edge of the corridor.

He turned the nozzle of the shower, waited for the water to heat, and when it was enough to scorch his pale skin, he stepped in and jerked the curtains shut.

His thoughts digressed immediately from the awaiting future to the events that would take place today. Len would become his friend after the party- he would strongly see to that -and from there, things could be sorted out. But first, he'd do something for himself. He'd audition for Miku's band, and likely fail; but he'd at least try, unlike before, and that was enough for his satisfaction.

There was another matter, though, one that he'd been trying to avoid. What could he possibly do to save these people? Sure, he could befriend them, but what good what that actually do? For a fleeting moment, he thought that by putting some kind of an end to Okunuma Roro, he could save Miku and Len and Rin and Megumi.

The water began to feel rather frigid then, and Kaito slowly slid out of the shower.

He dried off and dressed into his uniform (which he hadn't really missed, what with all the buttons of his polo and the tightness of the blazer, and, God, he could never tie his tie rightâ€¦), combing out his hair with his fingers until it didn't look so flat.

Kaito stuck his head into his room, staring boredly at the clock. He was still too early.

Meandering out into the kitchen, he flicked on the lights and spotted a folded piece of scrap paper on the table. Inside, in his mother's sloppy handwriting, it read, I left for the shop! I'll be home around 2. Have a good birthday, my blueberry, have lots of fun! And good luck at the audition! - Mom.

He pursed his lips and set it back down. Her outgoing kindness had always been something he was proud of inheriting.

A good fifteen minutes of nothing but glaring at a clock passed, and Kaito decided it was about time to get a move on. He slung his bag over his shoulder, and hoped to whatever Gods may have existed that nothing would go wrong today.

The front door flew open a moment before he opened it himself.

"Happy Birthday, Kaito!"

From the bottom of the porch, Rin was beaming, her hands outstretched before her with a small, neatly wrapped present resting in the palms of her gloved hands. Len stood beside her, hands in his pockets, a half-smile plastered to his lips.

Kaito grinned at them as he twisted his scarf around his neck, shutting the door behind him and hurrying down the steps. "Thanks," he cooed, and slowly took the gift from Rin's hands.

"I got you three!" she exclaimed, waving her arms above her head. "You get this one now, the second one at lunch, and the third at the party."

"Meiko's gonna be seething. She tries to best you every year."

"And she never does! I reign supreme present giver. Now- open it! Before she gets here!"

_It's an American book, _Kaito recalled as he delicately peeled back the wrapping paper. _It was...maybe something by Stephen King. I don't think I ever read it, though_.

His fingers hesitated, then tore away what was left of the paper and stuffed it into his pocket. An immediate sense of confusion washed over him.

"Do you like it?" Rin asked, rocking eagerly on her heels.

Kaito examined it without looking at it at all for another heartbeat, his lips drawn into a particularly enthusiastic smile. "How many songs?"

Len perked up at this. "Twenty-three," he said, gesturing toward the mix tape in the bluenette's hands.

"I wasn't too sure of all the songs you like, so I added some of my favorites. And Len's, too."

She didn't get me this before, I'm sure of it, but...This is different. This is better. "This is-,"

"BAKAITO!"

Kaito glanced up just in time to see Meiko fly out from in between the twins. Her arms were suddenly around his neck, legs kicked up from the ground with enough force to knock them both back into the fresh snow. There was a whirlwind of white around him, and, cutting through it, a glowing pair of warm brown eyes. "Happy Birthday, my filthy idiot-,"

"_The mixtape_" Rin cried.

Meiko peered at the blonde for a moment, brow quirked. "What mixtape?"

"Get up, you might've crushed it!"

"Uh, I think it's fine," Kaito mumbled, waving it above his head.

"Oh!" With a shaky smile, Rin breathed a sigh of relief and clasped her hands behind her back. "Okay. Good, then! Well, in any case, we should probably head off!~"

"Wait, whoa. She got you a _mixtape_?" Meiko, still locked in some sort of a state of disbelief, launched a hand up to snatch the item from Kaito's grip. She scowled. "Aw, _damnit_! She bested me again!"

Len snorted. "Your present must be pretty lame for it to be bested by a mix tape."

"Yeah?! Well, what'd you get him then?" the brunette howled, throwing herself onto her feet to take a menacing step toward Len.

He shrugged, offering a loose smirk. "I can't tell. It'd ruin the surprise."

"Why I oughta-,"

Rin cleared her throat, tugging at her brother's arm and pulling him to her side. "You two can bicker any day that's not _today_, can't you?" she asked.

"I guess." Meiko pouted and took a step back toward Kaito as he rose out of the snow and wiped the flakes from his coat.

Already, the day wasn't shaping out to be so terrible. For that, among many other things, he was thankful.

The four of them started down the road, the snow accumulating within every pace they took. Above them, the sun had been drowned out by a mass of grey clouds, the diminished light casting a gloom across the city.

By the time they reached the school, the weather had only worsened, and their figures were as white as the torrent around them.

Kaito glanced around the snowy courtyard, spotting Miku waiting by one of the benches toward the staircase leading into the building, her hands clutching a bag above her head to keep the snow at bay. She noticed Kaito and lit up, waving him over excitedly.

"Good luck, Kaito!" Rin cooed, clapping him on the shoulder a few times before scuttling into the building with Meiko right on her heels. Len followed a bit more hesitantly, his eyes gliding across Miku with something near distaste. He turned his head sharply from her and took off after his sister.

Miku, oblivious, bounded toward Kaito and tugged at the sleeve of his jacket. "Happy Birthday, Kai-kun!" she cheered. Her lips were stretched into a wide, hopeful grin, the kind that only actors could perfect. Snowflakes caught on her pale blue lashes, and her long twintails danced along her thin waist. Kaito wondered not for the first time if guys like Roro or Len found her attractive, because he

didn't. As much as he looked at her, whether it be this moment or twenty years ago, he couldn't find himself attracted to Hatsune Miku.

He'd always wondered if that meant there was something wrong with him. Revisiting the query was an epidemic ready to rip him to shreds.

"Thanks," he said. He made a limp gesture for the staircase. "Band room?"

Miku nodded furiously and marched up the stairs. Kaito followed, his fingers running over the smooth surface of the mix tape in his pocket.

The inside of the school was warm, heat leaking from every crack and crevice. As they walked, Kaito shrugged off his coat and draped it over his shoulder, fisting his fingers into the fabric until they reached the band room, crammed up in the basement with an assortment of cased instruments strewn across the floor. It smelled of dust and musk, but it was refreshing. It would always be refreshing.

"Here!" Miku said as she lifted a guitar from the edge of the room. Although worn, the paint chipped and the strings close to snapping, it could suffice for another use or two. Kaito accepted it into his arms, draping the strap over his neck and tuning it by ear.

When it sounded alright, he strummed a few chords and let a smile grace his features. He peered up at Miku, jumping as their eyes made immediate contact. She dipped her head. "Ready?"

"Uh-huh. Anything particular you want me to play?"

"I've heard you write your own stuff," she said. "Play me one of your originals!"

Kaito's heart jumped into his throat. His fingers twitched, and slowly settled down across the frets. "Alright," he muttered. He took a deep breath.

And he played.

* * *

><p>"So you're in?" Meiko queried from where she'd collapsed in Len's empty seat. "Now you'd fit that star idol couple stereotype, and that 'in-the-same-band' one if you dated her, y'know."

Kaito lifted a brow skeptically. "What are you talking about?"

Releasing a sharp exhale, Meiko waved her hands wildly at the tealette seated at the front of the classroom. "_Her_, I mean. She's got the hots for you. _You_! Of all people! You're not just gonna let that slip by, right? Don't be an idiot, Bakaito."

"I don't really have any interest in dating," Kaito said, resting his chin in the cusp of his hand. He'd had his fair share of relationships in his adult life, none of which had lasted very long;

most of his suitors called him out for being too distant. That bewildered him to no extent, considering he was more clingy than anything else, but he'd decided to push it aside years ago. His lacking ability of dating wasn't much of a bother to him.

"Why?" Meiko groaned, reaching out to pull a piece of pork from Kaito's tray.

He slapped her hand away on impulse and yanked his plate closer to his chest. "Girls have cooties."

"Oh, dear God- what are you turning today? _Seven_?"

"Mentally, yes."

Meiko sneered. "That sure explains-,

She was interrupted by a shot of yellow and the clatter of a box being tossed upon the surface of Kaito's desk. The blunette looked up and was not in the least surprised to find Rin standing there, her hands fidgeting with her sweater vest and a grin on her face. "My second gift," she said simply, nodding her head at it.

"_Another one_?!" Meiko threw her hands over her head in surrender. "I give up! Three years in a row now, Rin wins!"

"It's not that great," Rin mused. Her smug smile said otherwise.

Kaito rolled his eyes and plucked off the ribbon at the top of the box. The blue wrapping paper beneath it was smooth and sleek, and it had snowmen at each of the corners. He almost felt guilty for cleaving right through it and leaving it as nothing but waste upon his desk. He popped open the top of the box and cast Rin a wary glance before looking in.

She laughed. "Since you're going to be playing your guitar a lot from now on, I figured I would get you some of the basic necessities."

After rummaging through tissue paper and confetti, Kaito's fingers stumbled upon a solid package. Inside were picks, strings, a tuner, and, at the bottom of the box, nearly concealed by the excess, was a journal.

Rin tapped the back cover as Kaito tugged it out from the wrapping. "For writing down your lyrics- inspiration, or what have you. There should be some pens in there too."

"Holy crap," Kaito muttered, "this is a lot," and he gradually began setting all the items, aside from the notebook, back into the gift box, closing the lid over the opening. "Thank you."

"Of course, Kaito. But- oh, thank Len too. He had the idea for the journal."

"You Kagamines are too good at this present-giving thing," Meiko complained.

And they were. Hell, they really were.

That journal, resting at the edge of Kaito's desk, the cover pale blue and the pages pristine and even- he'd seen it before. He knew he had.

It took him until the end of lunch, when Meiko had retired to her designated seat, when Roro settled in beside him and poked at his arms, when Len had flopped down in front of him, silent, drawing on his hands; it took Kaito until then to realize just where it was he'd seen the notebook.

In his apartment, eleven years into the future, on the day Kagamine Len entered and requested to see his lyrics, this very journal had been sitting on his desk amid hundreds of other threadbare papers.

Kaito wasn't sure if this was coincidence or not. Something told him it wasn't. This was something out of those movies with mentions of paradoxes and anomalies that tore through the space time continuum. Well, perhaps it wasn't something to such an extent. Butâ€¦|

It was enough to make him think twice about what, exactly, it was he was here to do.

* * *

><p>Kiyoteru thumbed through a stack of files at his desk, every so often shoving his glasses up the bridge of his nose. They'd slip back down his face not a half a second later, and it looked as though he were starting to get annoyed.<p>

Kaito approached him slowly, giving a quick, "I'll catch up with you in a few!" to his fleeing companions from over his shoulder. He lingered at the table for a quiet moment, counting the beats of silence it took for the last of his classmates to fan out of the room. Then he fixed his gaze on his teacher and cleared his throat.

"What is it?" Kiyoteru asked, flicking his eyes from his work to the boy in front of him.

Kaito fidgeted with the material of his pants, feeling his usual childish anxiety bubble up his throat and consume his words. "Hey, so you and Yokune-san mentioned an assignment coming up this weekâ€¦|"

"Yes."

"...And I was wondering...Could I request having Len in my group?"

An eyebrow quirked in contemplation, Kiyoteru let his eyes fall back down to the files on his desk. "What for?"

I'm altering time, and this is one of the steps I rightfully believe I must take.

"We've recently become friends," Kaito explained, "and I feel like he's struggling with his academics, so I wanted to be able to do something in class to help him out."

"Hassling with most of his classes he may be- but literature is not one of them." Kiyoteru straightened his posture and offered Kaito a ginger smile. "I would like to think you'd know that. He comes out one slot above you in every language check. You must have an ulterior motive for this. Enlighten me."

Kaito itched behind his neck. "To get to know him better, I guess?"

"That sounds more like you," Kiyoteru said. He drummed his fingers thoughtfully atop his desk. "I'll see what I can do."

A breath Kaito hadn't known he'd been holding escaped his lips. "Thank you!"

"Of course." As Kaito turned to leave, Kiyoteru held up his left hand to add, "And Shion?"

Kaito halted dead in his tracks. "Yeah?"

"The Kagamines-...What you do for them is good. They need it. A solid friend, something of a leader. You're good for them." The man took a wavering breath. "All I ask of you is to never let anyone take advantage of the kindness you have to offer."

It took several moments for Kaito to scrape together what he wanted to say, and even then, it only came out as a strangled, "Okay."

To that, Kiyoteru nodded. "That'll be all."

"Okay," Kaito repeated. He adjusted the weight of his bag on his shoulders and hurried toward the exit of the room, finding Roro, Meiko, Rin and Len standing just outside of it, their backs against the opposing wall, their eyes shifting up to him as he advanced.

"There you are," Meiko huffed, dropping her arms to her waist and ambling toward the double doors leading out of the building. "I was getting sick of waiting!"

"It took, like, two minutes," Roro snapped as he chased after her.

"That's two minutes too long!"

Rin shook her head at them in mock disappointment. "They're as loud as ever, today," she murmured. Then a light burst in her eyes and she twisted her fingers into her skirt. "I wonder who else is going to be in the band with you."

"I think I saw Ritsu going down to the band room," Len affirmed. He kicked himself off the wall and paced to Kaito's side. "And Iroha."

And Piko, and Luka, and Aria and Flower...I can't really remember who made it, though. Luka for sure, but...Hopefully that hasn't changed.

"Quite the group," Rin laughed, and headed out the front doors into

the snow.

And then it was just Len, small and quiet beside Kaito, the slightest hint of a smile on his lips as he walked forward with his hands clenched in his pockets. "Hey," he blurted, "what's your favorite color?"

"Huh?"

"I dunno. I'm curious."

Kaito felt his face flush in color, the breath nearly leaving his constricted lungs. He wasn't sure why the brutal honesty in Len's voice hit so close to home. "Red," he said quickly.

"Really?" Len snickered. "You're kidding."

"Why's that so funny?"

"I was sure it was blue."

"Not everyone's favorite color is their hair color," Kaito mumbled, smoothing his bangs across his forehead. "So, what's your favorite color?"

Len tilted his head back discreetly, his eyes tracing the tiles of the ceiling. "Orange," he said, "but, not, like...bright orange."

"You're very serious about this entire 'favorite color' thing."

The blonde shrugged and hesitated at the doors, waiting until Kaito pushed them open to step out. He quickly tugged his hood over his head in response to the assaulting winds. The weather had done little meliorating over the course of the day.

"What's your favorite manga series?" Len asked, not once leaving the bluenette's shadow from the top of the staircase to the bottom.

"The Onibi Series," Kaito said hesitantly. It had been, much to his mother's disliking, his favorite series growing up. Whenever he got his hands on a part of it, he didn't put it down until he was finished.

"You're into gore?"

"Not as much as I used to be. But, yeah."

Len stared down at his feet and hunched his shoulders, his fingers gripping the strings of his hoodie. "And your favorite author?"

"You ask a lot of questions," Kaito laughed.

He wasn't expecting to see the flash of confusion in Len's eyes. "Is that bad?" he asked, his head cocked to the side and a brow raised in wonder.

You don't think he's freaky? Meiko's distant voice pestered.

Not freaky, Kaito thought to himself. It's more...reserved.

Insecure. And maybe a little temperamental._

"It's fine! I don't mind," Kaito said, offering some kind of a reassuring smile. He wasn't sure if he'd imagined it or not, but Len perked up, so the blunette continued, "I can't say I have a favorite author, but my favorite series is Pandora Vox. For now."

"So, Kemu? You like him?"

"Uh-huh."

Len released a puff of vapor from in between his lips, his eyes slipping toward the three silhouettes waiting for them at the edge of the courtyard. He fumbled distractedly with his ear muffs. "He's alright."

"Wait, you like Kemu?" Kaito blurted, and he felt as though something had took hold of his heart and squeezed.

"A little. Reincarnation was tolerable, but I couldn't get past the first two pages of Invisible."

"Aw, man, really? Invisible's great. You should give it another shot!"

Len shook his head assertively. "Too slow. And the main character guy annoyed me in it. A lot. Annoying male protagonists are the worst."

"Who do you like then?"

"Ever heard of Gokuaku Maretu?" When Kaito shook his head, Len continued with, "He writes about a lot of controversial stuff. Society, and limitations, and suicide. It's dark, but it's relatable. And the characters are never typical. Which I like."

"I'll have to check him out, then. That sort of dark stuff is appealing."

"Mhm," Len murmured a fraction of a second before his sister finally fell in line with him. She gave Kaito a little wink of approval, to which he responded with a thumb's up, and they both pretended that Len hadn't noticed.

The rest of the walk back to the Shion abode was, if Meiko's spontaneous shouting didn't count, quiet, and Kaito relished in the peace that would dissipate the second he stepped foot into the threshold of his house.

Upon entering, Meiko set her hands on his hips and hissed, "If you got ice cream cake again, I swear, Bakaito, I'm going to rip your head off."

"That's needlessly violent, don't ya think?" Roro asked, slipping off his sneakers and setting them at the edge of the doormat.

"There's no such thing as needlessly violent," Meiko protested. Beside her, Len went rigid, and Rin's eyelids fluttered a few times, as if washing something out of her vision.

Kaito decided they were in need of a topic change. He set his bag down on the couch in the lounge, saying, "Sorry, Mei, it's ice cream cake again. On the bright side, there's cookies," whilst poking around for his mother. The lights were on, so she was probably home.

_Oh. _A memory clicked into place. _She would always do those loud entrances._

"What kind of cookies?" Meiko demanded, storming after Kaito into the kitchen. "If they're ice cream cookies, I'm not kidding, I will-,"

"_Surprise!_"

Avanna popped out from behind the fridge, and although the action failed to even so much as make Kaito blink, Meiko shrieked and leapt six feet into the air, the present in her arms crashing to the floor. "Sorry, sorry!" Avanna laughed, waving a hand dismissively by her torso. "I didn't mean for that to work so well."

"You have a way with terrifying people half to death," Rin mused. She made her way carefully around the group to the table, setting the last of her gifts down beside the cake, an envelope resting neatly upon it. Len followed suit, and plopped his down beside his sister's. He fidgeted with it for a moment, eventually taking a reluctant step away so Meiko and Roro could brush past him for their own deliverance.

He hung by the fridge and watched Kaito, his lips pursed, his gaze piercing.

Avanna caught immediate sight of him. After giving Kaito a, "Happy Birthday, my sweet little blueberry!" and a kiss on the nose, she sidestepped toward Len and- _God_, Kaito thought_, she better not_-pinched his cheeks.

The blonde's face heated like a furnace.

"So you're Len, huh? It's really nice to meet you! I'm glad my son has enough courtesy to be kind to you, and to invite you over. So, please, make yourself at home! You're a part of this family just as much as I am, or as Kaito is." And then she kissed his forehead, and Kaito really wasn't sure if it was Len or himself that looked more ready to set themselves on fire from embarrassment.

Avanna (gradually) regained composure and resumed her post at the kitchen table, spreading out sandwich ingredients with a pleasant smile on her face.

But Len was still standing in his place, his facial expression dancing somewhere on the border of enthralled and petrified. Roro made to sling an arm over his shoulder and ruffle his hair, and Len made a sort of choking noise. "Hey, don't worry about it! That was just a ritual- it means you're part of the clan now!"

"Unfortunately," Meiko added through a mouthful of bread.

Kaito flicked her ear as he passed. "Play nice!"

"Make me!" Meiko sing-songed, and dashed around the table just in time to avoid another flick to the face.

"Kids these days," Avanna chuckled to herself. She slid the dessert products to one end of the table, the sandwich ingredients finding residence at the other. With a sigh of content, she wiped a bead of sweat from her brow and gestured for the group to sit down.

They did so obligingly.

Kaito found his usual seat by the sink, and with a flurry of movement, Len was beside him, that lop-sided Mona Lisa smile on his features. It was then he started his second barrage of questions.

"So, what's your favorite band?"

"Maybe Arlequin."

"You like J-Rock?" Len queried, astonishment blazing through his countenance.

"Uh-huh."

"What about Mejibray? Do you like them?"

"Uh-huh."

"What's your favorite song by them?"

"Um, Sliver, I guess? I can't really pick favorite songs," Kaito admitted with a shrug, snagging a few slices of bread and deli meat from the assorted plates.

Len stared at the ingredients on the table for a second, faltering, as if waiting for permission to make something for himself. From the seat next to him, Rin gave an urging nudge and flicked her hand at the loaf of bread. Her brother sneered and turned his attention back toward Kaito, fingers twitching in his lap.

"Do you play anything other than guitar?" he asked.

"I dabbled with piano for a bit. I wasn't the best at it, so, uh, I gave up."

Rin rolled her eyes. "You're too hard on yourself. You weren't that bad."

"Rin, he couldn't even play Hot Crossed Buns after six months of practicing it," Roro retorted.

"It was hard, okay? The keys were hard to hit. Strings are so much easier," Kaito groaned.

"I always thought piano was much easier than guitar," Len said, and finally, after a long while of intense staring, he gathered up what he needed for a sandwich and set it down on his plate.

Kaito propped his head up with his fist, allowing his gaze to trail

along Len's face, his chapped, bitten lips, his vibrant eyes, his slanted nose, his messy hair. He wondered why he hadn't befriended him sooner. "You play piano?" he asked.

"_Played_. I played, for a few years. I fell out of it."

"That's a shame." And something told him to press on. "Why?"

Len shifted in his seat, clenching his hands into fists at his sides. "I dunno. It got boring," he said, lifting his sandwich cautiously to his mouth.

A brief silence passed among them, broken only by Rin's declaration of, "Hey, Kaito! Did you tell your mom you made it?"

"What?"

She mimicked playing a guitar.

"Oh, right, that." Kaito swallowed and looked toward Avanna. "I made it into Miku's band."

"Ah, I'm not surprised!" Avanna giggled, ruffling his hair. "I'm proud you, sweetie. You're very talented."

"Thanks, Mom," Kaito coughed out. It was something of an accomplishment to get praise from her, since it was always, every time, so sincere and virtuous. It never failed to choke him up.

"Okay, I'm impatient," Avanna sighed, rocking back on her heels. "It's time for presents! What do you say?"

"Yes!" Rin cried, leaping up from her chair and gesturing toward her neatly wrapped gift box. "I can best Meiko for the third year in a row!"

The brunette ripped a chunk of bread from off her sandwich and whipped it at Rin. "Is that a challenge?!"

"It sure is!" With a delighted grin, Rin wiped the mustard-doused crumbs from off her cheek, taking her seat once more, her hands gripping the hem of her skirt.

"I'm opening yours' last," Kaito huffed, much to the blonde's dismay, and instead pulled Meiko's gift out from the stack. He sliced open the envelope taped onto the side and beamed at the familiar homemade card coated with glitter that rested inside.

Next came the wrapping paper, which was rather sloppy in comparison to the neat folds of both Rin and Len's own gifts, but it really didn't matter, as in moments it was scattered across the floor. Off with the lid, and-

Kaito clasped a hand over his mouth to stifle laughter.

"What?" Meiko whined. "_What?!_"

"Nothing, it's justâ€¦" Kaito whipped out what was in the box, and he couldn't help but release another series of breathy

chuckles.

"That's cute," Rin said, "but not as good as mine."

Which was probably true. Still, Kaito didn't mind the strip of fabric in his hands; it was officially among one of his favorite of Meiko's presents in the span of his life. He remembered getting it, this very day, eleven years ago. "Did you make it yourself?"

"Hell yes I did! It took me _weeks_."

Len lifted an eyebrow at her, bewildered. "It's a _scarf_. How long does it take to knit a scarf?"

"When you're as untalented as Mei, a couple of years, really," Kaito chuckled, and was met with a well-deserved mini tomato to the temple.

Avanna slid the next present in front of him- Roro's -and Kaito opened it knowing full and well what it was, but feigned enthusiasm regardless. So there was another video game to add to his collection, which he'd play twice and get bored of. It was the thought that counted though. That's what it always was.

Len's was next, and the boy nervously jittered as Kaito peeled through the wrapping and marveled at what was bestowed upon him. "Whoa," he breathed out, his gaze glissading up and down the covers of the three books he'd unveiled.

"You bring in your Kemu books all the time, and- well -a while back, when I liked him more, I got Reincarnation signed at a con, and I haven't seen you read Reincarnation, so I figured you'd like it," Len annotated. "The others are just two of my favorites that I thought you'd like. I mean, you're a heavy reader, and, Maretu- I think I mentioned him earlier -I thought he'd be up your alley."

"What are they about?"

Len sunk his teeth into his lip, his eyes flitting from the light fixtures above him to the books in Kaito's imploring fingers. "Adolescence is basically the mistakes made through a corrupted childhood, and Mind Brand is just a hypocritical girl that sees how fucked up- er, _screwed up_ -society is. They're good."

"I bet," Kaito murmured, and flipped through the first few pages of each before setting them aside next to Meiko's scarf.

Rin looked sidelong at the brunette and gave a weak smile. "I think we've both been bested."

"_Damn it_, being bested by _him_ is worse than being bested by _you_!"

"You're welcome," Len snorted, giving Meiko a two-fingered salute that induced nothing but a miniature fit of her rage.

When it settled, Kaito took hold of Rin's present, undoing the bow and peeling off the wrapping paper. It got repetitive after a while, and he was starting to not enjoy it so much.

What was inside, he couldn't say likewise about.

It was a necklace, the chain silver, and the emblem hanging from it an array of hues from the rainbow. He was ensure of what it represented, but the clasped it around his neck nonetheless.

"It's the Buddhist symbol of protection. Because you always say you want to to protect me, but I want to protect you too. If you're not here, then there's no wish for you to fulfill. But if you are, and you're safe, then there's nothing to worry about."

Kaito swore, at that paper, he was going to break down. His mother's hand on his head soothed him, however, and he could breathe easy, if only for a few moments.

What did ever do to deserve things like this?

Strange.

"Wait, wait," Avanna hummed, tapping a slender finger on the corner of the table. "I haven't given you my gift yet- I had to save the best for last." She held up a finger as a sign to wait, sprinted out of the room, and returned a heartbeat later with her arms behind her back. A splotch of brown peeked out from over her arm, and Kaito was sure, whatever this was, he'd never gotten it as a present before.

Avanna shook her hair from her eyes and took a sharp breath. "Sorry, kiddos, but mother knows best." She cracked a dazzling grin and tore her gift out from behind her, looking natural with it in her arms. She was a guitar player, after all, and there was no better home for guitars than the artists who could paint a world with them.

"You have to wait until after cake to play it, though," she said, wagging a finger in the air. "So, in that case...Who wants dessert?!"

* * *

><p>It was late. Meiko and Roro had left hours ago, but Rin had been persistent to stay, and Len didn't look like he minded so much either. So they'd sprawled out in the living room on the sofa, Rin squished in between the two boys with her head lolling every so often onto Len's shoulder. Whatever was on the TV had become a blur. None of them were really paying attention. Kaito was exhausted, and the Kagamines didn't look any better. He was sort of in a rush to just go to sleep, maybe strum a few chords on his new guitar.<p>

"Hey," he whispered, giving them each a tap to the forearm. They lazily turned their heads toward him. "Do you guys want to spend the night? We can probably-,"

"Oh, is it that late?" Rin gasped, stiffening as her eyes focused on the digital clock by the television. "We'd love to sleep over, really, but we have a lot of stuff to do at home."

Kaito felt a whirlwind of suspicion stir in his mind. He shook it off, rose to his feet, and gestured for the door. "I'll walk you back to your place, then," he suggested.

"You really don't have to," Rin started, but Len grabbed her arm, squeezed, and looked toward Kaito with a small nod.

"Let's get going, before the snow gets worse," the bluenette said, and made his way out to the foyer. He fished his jacket from off the coat rack and slid it over his arms, then tied his new scarf around his neck. It was itchy and irritable, but for Meiko, it didn't matter. As he stepped into his boots, he called, "Mom! I'm gonna walk Rin and Len home!"

Avanna poked her head out of the kitchen. "M'kay! Be careful! It's dark!"

He pulled back the door and let the twins duck out first, then followed after, into the snow, his feet kicking through massive clumps of powder.

They walked in silence all the way across the neighborhood.

Even at the doorstep of the Kagamine household, few words were spoken. Rin gave Kaito a hug, and he ruffled her hair and gave a, "Thank you," when she said, "Happy Birthday." She trotted up to the door and jiggled the doorknob. It stopped halfway through a rotation, and she let out an exasperated sigh, delving a hand into her pocket to look for- presumably -keys.

Kaito took the opportunity to look at Len, who held his gaze for a blissfully reticent moment. Then Len took a dainty step toward the blunette. He stopped. He took another, shaking, debating- and he settled for giving Kaito a pat on the shoulder. "Thanks," he said.

And Kaito laughed.

"Why are you thanking me?"

Len shrank in on himself, his vibrant eyes skipping across the flakes cloaking his feet. "You're...weird. But it's a good weird. You're the nice weird, and...That's good. So, thanks."

"You're welcome." Kaito smiled, and tousled Len's hair just like he would Rin's. "Thanks for the books! Maretu sounds really interesting."

"He is-,"

"Got it, finally," Rin called from the door.

Len held Kaito's gaze for another instant, like he was appreciating. Or maybe only wondering. Kaito understood that, he knew, watching as the blonde stepped over to his sister and disappeared into their pretty house. Rin waved once over her head, and she, too, was gone. Kaito waited until the lights came on to leave. He waited for the consolation of silence.

Then he started for his own house, and slipped into the door feeling like he was about to fall apart. His muscles were aching, his eyelids were excruciatingly heavy. "I'm going to bed," he hollered after stripping out of his winter clothes and hobbling toward the stairs.

Avanna burst out of the lounge before he could take one more step. Her hands found his shoulder, and she spun him around and, laughing, tugged him into a warm embrace. "How was it? Your birthday."

"Good," Kaito hummed. "I'm just tired."

"Your friends are a delight," Avanna sighed into his hair.

"Uh-huh."

"Len seems to really like you."

Kaito's cheeks burned red. _You're a man, get over yourself!_
"U-...Uh-huhâ€|?"

"I'm glad you invited him. He really seemed happy to spending time with you."

"Um...Goodnight, Mom!" he declared, removing himself from her hug to make a mad dash up the stairs.

"He and his sister are very cute too! You can't escape it!"

Then her voice was gone, and the door was closed, and the world, again, was quiet.

In the sanctuary of his room, the mattress calling was Kaito's name, and so he flopped down upon it and hitched the blankets over his head, breathing in the scent of detergent and sweets in an attempt to lull himself to sleep.

It didn't work.

He curled into himself. His thoughts trailed to Len and Rin, and how he hoped that when they walked into their house they were okay, that nothing hit them and that neither of them would feel the pain that Kaito had experienced for not half an instant the day previous. There was no telling what waited for them, and yet he convinced himself it was fine. They would be fine.

Everything would be fine.

Today, he would not be the boy who received the news his closest person could no longer attend his birthday parties, or hold his hand, or walk alongside him. Today would not be that day.

Tomorrow, though.

Tomorrow was unknown.

There was really nothing more terrifying than that.

* * *

><p>I didn't include a flashbackmemory scene in this chapter, just because I felt it was long enough already. The next one will likely start with a memory though! Anyways, Kaito's birthday was cute, imo, Avanna is such a good mom? Wow. Also, I apologize for any

spelling/grammatical errors, I was in a rush to proof read. Anyways,
review if this is your thing, and if not, see ya later! **

**With love,
>Hour.

End
file.